How 'Professionalism' Harms Workers of Color

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Texas A&M president M. Katherine Banks stepped down last week over the botched hiring of Kathleen McElroy, a Black veteran journalist with a PhD, decades of experience, and numerous industry accolades, to lead the journalism department. After facing increased scrutiny, multiple downgraded job offers—from a tenure-track role to a five-year contract, and ultimately a one-year contract—and a backlash to her hiring, McElroy ultimately decided not to take the job.

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The debacle has been blamed, in part, on Texas cracking down on support of diversity, equity and inclusion, which has been a hallmark of McElroy's work (among many other mainstream media fixtures like sports, dining, and obituaries). State lawmakers have banned DEI programs at publicly funded colleges.

But as they say on the internet, IYKYK. If you know, you know.

A clearly qualified candidate facing humiliation in the offer stage is something employers have been getting wrong for a long time. Also quite familiar: Texas A&M's racism in holding McElroy to a set of impossible standards, with journalism department head Hart Blanton telling the Texas Tribune: "The unusual level of scrutiny being given to the hiring of Dr. McElroy was acknowledged by one administrator to have been based, at least in part, on race." (It's worth noting that Banks' high-profile departure is the other side of the same coin: A white leader who had faced widespread performance concerns was given a convenient, face-saving excuse for an ouster.)

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One of the smartest voices I have read on the link between workplace norms and racism is Leah Goodridge, the managing attorney for housing policy at Mobilization for Justice, which provides civil legal services. She's also the author of a UCLA Law Review article on the subject, titled "Professionalism as a Racial Construct."

I spoke with Goodridge about how the written and unwritten rules of work clash with the advancement of people of color. Here are excerpts of our conversation, lightly edited for clarity:

Kathleen McElroy's case echoed something I've seen in my search and recruitment work: A marginalized candidate applies for a job (which they may have also been recruited for). During the interview, there's a suggestion of another role with a lower title or salary. Why is this happening? What's at play?

Here's the way this plays out. Sandy applies for a marketing director role. Company reviews her resume, sees she meets the experience level, and calls her in for an interview. Then during the interview, Company tells Sandy, 'We like you but feel you may be better suited for the marketing associate position. You can do that role and then work your way up to marketing director.'

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There are various reasons why a company may do this, some of which are understandable and valid. But some aren't, and that includes when a hiring director seeks to interview many candidates to say they had a diverse applicant pool, while diverting those marginalized applicants to another position that pays less with less authority in the company. You want to make sure there's no implicit bias happening. You can do that by making note of which applicants are streamlined to another job—if they are largely people of color, disabled, LGBTQIA, women, or part of any other marginalized group, then you'll want to change that practice.

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You had a LinkedIn post where you talked about entering the workforce and facing classism, such as not being able to afford activities that were deemed normal in career-climbing. Can you expand on how classism shows up in the workplace?

If you have vast financial resources, it is often easier to advance professionally than someone who doesn't. For example, in order to get a job, even entry level, many employers require some degree of experience. Internships have long been used to fill that gap. But many internships are unpaid, especially in government and the nonprofit sector.

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When you finally get the job, the primary type of activity peers do to bond is to go for drinks. That can be expensive, and exclusive since everyone doesn't drink. If you stay late at work, that may necessitate buying dinner, since you would normally eat dinner at home. And many jobs require the employee to pay out of pocket for work-related expenses first and then get reimbursed later, but everyone doesn't have the money available at that time.

Even the ability to outsource certain at-home tasks can affect an employee's energy level at work. In one of my first jobs, I would often come to work a bit tired on Monday because I would spend the weekend cleaning my apartment and doing laundry, which could take hours. One of my colleagues had suggested a house cleaner and laundry services, and it really dawned on me how people who had and used financial resources to outsource tasks didn't have to spend hours doing them. Child care is expensive as well.

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And lastly, sometimes classism shows up in hiring. That could look like rejecting a job applicant because they didn't attend an Ivy League school or because of the neighborhood they live in. I've heard of scenarios where concern is expressed over whether a candidate can come to work on time because they live in a far-out area (that is low-income). Yet the irony is the people making those decisions lived in affluent suburbs that were equally distanced, far-out neighborhoods (or sometimes a whole different state!). All of these markers of class may become barriers in the workplace and are not discussed enough.

Many managers disqualify applicants over typos in their cover letters or resumes. They are the same managers who say they want to hire nontraditionally or with 'an eye toward diversity.' What do you think of this practice?

It depends. I'm a lawyer, so for this particular profession, some judges frown on typos and it could make or break a case. A lot of law offices are looking for candidates who pay attention to detail. And that makes sense, since it's part of the job. For many other professions, it's not relevant.

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I think this speaks to a larger issue on how onerous the job-application process has gotten—some places will put candidates through five interview rounds and demand a Pulitzer Prize-level cover letter, but are barely paying above minimum wage and writing isn't part of the job. So I think generally being more flexible and open-minded when reviewing cover letters or resumes is helpful. It may simply be one mistake made at the beginning but not indicative of the candidate's entire background of qualifications.

Why do you think professionalism is an assertion of white supremacy?

Professionalism is a standard of a set of beliefs about how one should operate in the workplace. The problem is that it doesn't apply equally to all. There's been a lot of focus about how this plays out with appearances—like some workplaces that have rules that discriminate against Black people's natural hair texture and the styles that come with it.

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But this manifests behaviorally, too. If you take two people of equal position—one who is white and the other Black—and the white colleague raises their voice and disrespects the Black colleague, there may be more scrutiny and focus on the Black colleague's reaction than the actual offensive conduct. I've coined the term 'bias threshold' to represent how there is a societal expectation that people of color endure racism in the workplace under the guise of displaying that they're the polished, consummate professional with a thick skin. Ignoring or laughing off racist jokes is seen as being mature; meanwhile, challenging racism in the workplace is often infantilized ('Back in my day, people could take a joke!').

Ironically, it is often those bad actors in a workplace who are the most sensitive. They're unwilling to change their behavior and may feign ignorance about its harm. Meanwhile they may simultaneously proclaim that colleagues who don't endure their racism don't have a thick skin or are too sensitive. Are the bad actors who further racism in my office called unprofessional? Or do people instead tend to focus on their targets and either praise or scrutinize how they respond to the racism?